

GRACE AND COURTESY FOR THE WHOLE SCHOOL

by Mary Lou Cobb

Mary Lou Cobb gives a framework from a very practical point of view, leaning on the aspects of grace and courtesy that are fundamental and arise out of a Montessori administrative point of view. Her examples are pragmatic, such as the grace and courtesy of a greeting, of movement, as a whole-school culture, and the right use of language. She calls for a consciously selected whole-school environment that creates a “house for families.” Mary Lou gives us a clear vision in direct terms of how to present a clear, spiritual message around an administrator’s presence in a school to provide optimal transformational moments for the teachers.

PART 1: WHAT DOES GRACE MEAN? WHAT IS COURTESY?

Grace comes from the Latin word *Gratia* meaning “charm, favor, thanks.” When we talk about educating the child through the lessons of grace and courtesy, we strive to teach the child how to move about in an unobtrusive manner, to be conscious of one’s movements. In the primary, the guide says, “let me show you how to walk,” and what is modeled is care, attention, precision, and control of movement. The same is true when we show the young child how to place a chair quietly, how to carry a map, close a door, etc. These presentations and lessons are done in silence, teaching the child how to work in the social context of a community. Children are born to move. What we want to teach them is how to move with more care, attention and control of movement, or graceful movement.

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When children can learn to move with grace, they develop confidence and poise. When I think of people in my life who were examples of having grace, I think of Princess Grace, Jacqui Onassis, and Princess Di. All were able to show grace under pressure as well. They were able to transcend the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Courtesy is defined simply as “well-mannered conduct indicative of respect for or consideration of others.” I define courtesy as kind, thoughtful, generous (as in second to another), humble, respectful, and polite. Through the lessons of grace and courtesy we instill the values of respect, honesty, integrity, courage, and kindness. We prepare the child for life.

CREATING A CULTURE OF GRACE AND COURTESY

Creating a culture of grace and courtesy begins with introductions. This is how we begin to make a relationship—whether it is with our prospective parents, our teachers, and, of course, our students. We will usually begin with a handshake.

I would like to pause, ask you to stand up, and turn to a few people you don’t know and introduce yourself. Tell that person a little about yourself: where you live, where your school is, some-

thing more personal—are you married? Do you have children? Grandchildren?

When I was in the primary classroom, I gave lessons on how to greet one another with a handshake:

- Always look into a person’s eyes
- Always “grin” (give them a happy smile)
- Always give a firm handshake

I will now teach you a little song that you can take back to teach to your primary students. It is called, *One Misty, Moisty Morning*. May I have three volunteers step forward? Now, I invite all of you to find a place in the room—form circles of four and choose one to be the teacher. In your classrooms, the teacher can always be an older child as well. Let’s all sing our little song together and remember to be sure to look your teacher in the eyes, give a firm handshake, and smile!

One misty, moisty morning,
When cloudy was the weather,
There I met an old man
All clothed in leather,
All clothed in leather,
With a cap under his chin.
How do you do?
And how do you do?
And how do you do again?

So what is the origin of this ritual of giving another a handshake? The students in my classes always loved knowing how this came about, and that was when two individuals met, they took out their hands to show

that they did not have any weapons, that they were friendly, and they sealed this by shaking hands with their right hand. Of course, there are other greeting rituals from other parts of the world. Your students will love learning about them.

We must remember that through work, concentration is developed, and from concentration, normalization is revealed. This is the gift we can give to our children.

The Cobb School has a sister school in Bhutan, which is a small kingdom nestled between China and India. One of our teachers, Lhamo Pemba, always bowed to her students and the toddlers responded in turn. As you probably know, the deeper the bow, the more reverence you show the person you are greeting. I could go on and on, but I want to emphasize the importance of greetings. If we are truly to build a culture of grace and courtesy, it begins with how we greet one another.

I also believe that one of the greatest gifts we can give to another is remembering their name. I believe that a lot of thought goes into naming a child, and very often the name has meaning. We should honor each individual by remembering his name and greeting him by name. Each year I was in a classroom, I asked my primary parents to send me a brief note as to how they chose their child's name and did the name, in fact, have a special meaning to them. The responses were always fascinating and very powerful. Often, children try to live up to their name, if it is shared with them.

I had a student in my class whose name was George Byron. I will never forget the letter I received from his mother about how she and her husband decided to name their son, George. They were British and, in fact, named him after King George V who successfully ruled the British Empire through war and economic depression. King George V was thought to have embodied diligence and duty. Their young George seemed to live up to these qualities as well.

And so the work of building a culture of grace and courtesy begins with a deeply personal and respectful greeting. I may sound old fashion, but I do *not* believe that giving a "high five" or the "bump" or referring to our students as, "you guys" is what we should be teaching our students. I think they deserve more.

HOW SOCIETY UNDERMINES GRACE AND COURTESY

There have been enormous changes in decorum in our society over the past fifty years since I began teaching. Times have definitely changed and it makes our work much harder. Children naturally absorb that which is in their environment, and what they are observing today is adults attached to their iPhones, iPads, or computers. And, by the way, we are not going to change that. I recently observed a



family of four at a restaurant at dinner and all four—mother, father, son and daughter—on their phones. They did not look at each other and talk. And in our schools, we have our students set the table with pretty linens, nice china, and they are encouraged how to have polite conversation, right? Is the Montessori approach becoming obsolete? Is grace and courtesy outdated?

Let's think about the kind of culture you want for your school. A Montessori school is based on respect for others and is imbedded with kindness, thoughtfulness, compassion, gentleness, and peace. It is a place where the adults model grace and courtesy toward one another, toward the students, the animals and plants, the earth. How do you establish such an environment in this world we live in today?

I maintain that it all begins and rests with *you*: the heads and administrators of schools. Yes, we set the tone and we set the expectations, not only for our faculty, but for our students and their parents as well. Let me share with you how I strive to go about this. As head of school, I believe that it is my job to prepare the environment for the whole school. Within the school, the teachers prepare their classroom environments. As Montessorians, we know that it is

our job to prepare the environment to meet the needs of our students as they pass from one plane of development to another.

Let us remember Montessori's definition of a school:

a prepared environment in which the child, set free from adult intervention, can live life according to the laws of its development. It is a place of spontaneous work, where the child is allowed to perfect himself, using the environment as a means. (Standing 118)

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THE WHOLE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Teachers spend an enormous amount of time preparing their environments, and we as heads of school need to do the same. We are ultimately responsible for the whole school environments, the look and feel of everything, from the entry way to the hallways, classrooms, and offices.

Creating a House for Families

What is a parent's first contact with the school? Perhaps it is by looking at your website? So, what do they see? How do you portray yourself on this site? Maybe they receive literature from you before visiting. Maybe they call and speak with someone at the school. Who is that someone? Is that person warm and inviting or is the phone answered by someone in the classroom and distracted by children with whom they should be working? What do parents see when they enter your school? Is there a school sign so they can find you? When they arrive at school, how are they received and by whom?

In the classrooms, attention to detail is enormously important. I maintain that attention to detail in preparing the whole school environment is just as important. First impressions are long lasting and can make or break a relationship.

Let's think about the universal needs and tendencies of children: love, order, repetition, discipline, movement, language, and beauty. I

have made every effort to make sure that the children can meet their needs *throughout* the whole school and not just in their classrooms. Dr. Montessori referred to her first school in San Lorenzo as the *Casa dei Bambini* (the Children's House). I believe that we need to make sure that our schools feel more like a children's house, rather than an institution. Our schools should be filled with love, order, the opportunity for language, movement—inside and out—repetition, and beauty.

In 1974, I opened a school in the basement of a building with nine students, ages three and four. The school grew to two classrooms. Eleven years later, I learned that we would have to find another location, and I then spent the following two years looking for another place to house the school. Ultimately, I was able to rent a dormitory from a neighboring independent school for girls, The Ethel Walker School. After five years there, we were able to purchase the building and the five acres with it. Our little Montessori Children's House, as it was called, was renamed The Cobb School, Montessori—a great surprise and honor. The Cobb School is a not-for-profit school and the cost for adding classrooms, a library, science laboratory, art studio, etc. were the result of the generosity of families both past and present, to ensure that the prepared environment of the whole school meets the needs of all our students.

I was met with many challenges when I moved into our building, which was a brick building that served as a dormitory for girls: concrete walls, dark hallways, and metal doors. The second floor would be used for offices, but it needed to be more inviting for visitors. We knocked down walls downstairs and created classroom space. We put a classroom in the

basement, but called it, "the courtyard classroom," as there were parents who didn't want their children in a basement.

If our schools are to lead the child to transcendence, then we must continually stretch to our higher selves. This is what I believe Montessori meant by the spiritual transformation of the teacher. We too, as administrators, need to undergo a spiritual transformation and this requires reflection, introspection, and an understanding of ourselves.



Over the following nineteen years, we were able to expand the school to include: one parent-infant room, two full-day toddler classes, one half-day toddler class, three primary classrooms, two lower elementary classrooms, two upper elementary classrooms, a library, science laboratory, and an after-care room that we call the *nest*.

We built a glass sun porch to connect rooms filled with love of the outdoors, light, and beauty as an effort to meet the child's needs for beauty and order. We also worked with an architect to build a very beautiful playground that is wood instead of plastics and that fits naturally into the environment.

As I mentioned, one of the universal needs of children is for movement, inside and out. With this in mind we have gardens outside of each classroom. Last week we broke ground on *the great hall* our gym/community center, which will be opened in May and will coincide with our fortieth anniversary celebration for parents, students, and grandparents, all past and present.

For me, it simply began with a vision and dream for children and families. And so now you know, I am a dreamer, and I believe that you can make your dreams come true if you are willing to commit to them and work hard—very, very hard.

Our parents and children need to experience something special when they enter our schools. The beauty, the order, the simplicity, the peacefulness will be absorbed—if only unconsciously. Bricks and mortar are one thing, but now let's look at those who are at work and play in the building. How are these people perceived? How are you and I perceived? Are we running around like chickens with our heads cut off, breathlessly? Our teachers know that if their classrooms are to be calm and peaceful that they must model calm and peacefulness. We need to do the same. Each and every child, parent, faculty member, should always be treated with the utmost dignity and respect (grace and courtesy).

PART II: EXERCISES TO FOSTER GRACE AND COURTESY

Being a head of school is known to be one of the most challenging jobs a person can have and has been compared to an air traffic controller. Each and every day is filled with highs and lows. We as heads are bombarded with issues over the course of the day and night! We are all about process, however, and not about instant results and instant gratification. We want our students to learn that through hard work and deep concentration (flow) they will achieve true fulfillment and happiness.



We were the first school in Connecticut to show the film, “Race to Nowhere.” Our parents were all over it. One year later, all they seemed to care about was data, test scores, and Common Core. If this doesn’t challenge one’s grace and courtesy, I don’t know what does. Here is the truth, we actually want each of our students to reach their fullest potentials—academically, socially, and emotionally. We want them to be kind, compassionate, independent, and responsible human beings.

Case Study Exercises

Break into groups and discuss cases and potential responses.

Case Study 1

A parent violates the sacred space of the classroom. She walks into the classroom any time of day and looks through her child’s cubby. She flips through her child’s work and approaches the teacher for a mini-conference, and the tone is often angry and suspicious. How do you handle this parent with grace and courtesy and accomplish what you must?

Case Study 2

There is a parent in your community who thinks he knows Montessori better than you and your staff. He comes to you with “solutions” for the problems he perceives. How do you handle this parent with grace and courtesy and accomplish what you must?

Case Study 3

There is a teacher and an assistant with tension between them. The assistant confides in you that she feels like the teacher treats her like a servant. The teacher complains that the assistant avoids unpleasant tasks. How do you handle this teacher and assistant with grace and courtesy and accomplish what you must?

Case Study 4

A teacher you have been evaluating and coaching is resisting your help. The classroom is not peaceful and the children are struggling with their work and with each other. How do you handle this teacher with grace and courtesy and accomplish what you must?

Case Study 5

The board of trustees or board of education comes to the table wearing their business hats. They don't seem to understand the role of grace and courtesy in your school and so your leadership style puzzles them. How do you handle this board with grace and courtesy and accomplish what you must?

Grace and Courtesy Leads to a Normalized Community

Montessori is not just a method of education; it is a way of life. Some say it is a preparation for life, and it is, but I believe that it is about living life to the fullest. It is not about sheltering children from the hardships of life; it is about preparing them to be able to handle challenges with grace and dignity.

As I said in my opening, if we are to build a culture of grace and courtesy, it begins with us. Over the last few years, I have built in some daily rituals that help me to be centered and to be present for others. In the mornings, I get up a little earlier and meditate and, quite honestly, I begin my day with prayers. One of my prayers is that I will serve my school community well: my students and their families.

When I get to school, I make a point of greeting each of my employees—I go class to class and wish them good morning and a good day with their students. At arrival, I stand outside with the assistants and greet the students and their parents as they go through the arrival line. At dismissal, I go outside and bid students and parents farewell.

Normalization is a point of arrival, not of departure. Most importantly, it begins with us. Do each of you have the characteristics of normalization: poise, thoughtfulness, self-discipline, inner peace? If our schools are to lead the child to transcendence, then we must continually stretch to our higher selves. This is what I believe Montessori meant by the spiritual transformation of the teacher. We too, as administrators, need to undergo a spiritual transformation and this requires reflection, introspection, and an understanding of ourselves. It requires humility and a willingness to change for the benefit of the child.



Begging Bowls

The work you do is hard. It is full of personal sacrifice. It is lonely at the top, because you are the ones taking care of everyone in your community: the students, parents, grandparents, trustees, and alumni. Everything you do is for others. You are all a bit like monks!

In the Buddhist tradition, every monk carries with him a begging bowl on his journey through life. Everything put in his bowl is considered a gift from the universe: the good and the bad. The act of begging instills humility and appreciation. The bowl is perhaps the ultimate symbol of selflessness. I have some clay for each of you to take it back to put on your desk to remind yourself of the great work you do on behalf of the child.

CONCLUSION

Our society is at war with families today. It is as if we have all jumped on the same merry-go-round and don't know how to get off. Like the computer, faxes, email, smart phones, and tablets, the merry-go-round goes faster and faster. We can make a different choice. We can step off, slow down, and take a breath. Our schools can provide a place of refuge, a sacred place that is pretty, peaceful,

and conducive to harmonious relationships. We can and should provide daily rituals for our children, parents, and faculty. This includes how we handle arrival and dismissal, lunchtime, and birthdays. We should incorporate traditions such as a harvest lunch or a May Day celebration. We should observe our students, faculty, parents, board, and community and communicate with them effectively. Most importantly, we can give the gift of grace and courtesy to others, for it is through this gift that normalization will be revealed.

A school that is normalized is, after all, in a state of grace and, as such, will reflect all that is good and pleasing to God.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Dr. Maria Montessori:

Human teachers can only help the great work that is being done, as servants help the master. Doing so, they will be witnesses to the unfolding of the human soul and to the rising of a New Man who will not be a victim of events, but will have the clarity of vision to direct and shape the future of human society. (*Education for a New World*)

Let us aspire to Dr. Montessori's vision for humanity. Let us give the gift of grace and courtesy to instill moral excellence within our schools. It is our duty.

REFERENCES

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